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### [Deepa's Inferno: Domestic Violence and the Indian Diaspora in \*Heaven on Earth\*](#)



by Mandy Van Deven  
- India -

Couched in a story from Indian mythology, Deepa Mehta's newest feature film, [Heaven on Earth](#), blurs the line between reality and fantasy to provide a nuanced and authentic look at the struggles of a young Punjabi woman who has immigrated to Canada from her homeland for what turns out to be an abusive marriage. Never one to shy away from heavy and complex issues, Mehta's film addresses arranged marriage, Indian family dynamics and expectations, domestic violence, and love.

I was introduced to Mehta's films through her Elements Trilogy—*Earth*, *Fire*, and *Water*—which made her a somewhat controversial filmmaker in her homeland, where I currently reside. These three compelling films center on Indian women's experiences in the diaspora and resonate across geographic and cultural boundaries. Her depiction of lesbian sexuality in *Fire* prompted outrage from conservative Hindus and led to her film crew being attacked in India during the filming of *Water*. The aggression forced Mehta to relocate the filming to Sri Lanka and significantly delayed production. The desire to avoid this type of incident may be one reason Mehta chose Canada as the setting for *Heaven on Earth*.



The film received a lot of media attention when it was released here in India (where it is called *Videsh*), but most people here still haven't heard of it. As is true with American cinema, film is a medium of escape for most, and though *Heaven on Earth* draws on elements of myth and fantasy, the reality of the film is stark. The protagonist, Chand, leaves her home in Ludhiana, India to live in a small town outside of Ontario, Canada and be joined with Rocky, whom she has never met, in an arranged marriage. She arrives to discover she will be living in a two bedroom apartment with Rocky and six of his family members, for whom Chand is expected to perform the roles of a traditional housewife

and breadwinner by working in a factory with Rocky's sister. Nearly as soon as she arrives, Chand is made the focal point of Rocky's explosive temper.

Mehta sets the viewer up for the shock of the first assault on Chand. Until that point one is made to feel the happy and excited nervousness Chand feels in leaving India for a 'better life' in Canada, an all too common and cliché cinematic storyline. It is only when a calm and collected Rocky unexpectedly strikes Chand across the face that the viewer feels the full weight of her vulnerability and isolation in this new, strange country.



• Chand's mother-in-law goads Rocky into abusing her. Film still courtesy of [Mongrel Media](#) •

The assault happens in full view of Rocky's family, and no one but Chand seems surprised, reflecting one obscured aspect of family violence in South Asian communities: that abuse does not only take place between intimate partners. At times such violence may be committed,

instigated, or condoned by other family members as well. After watching *Heaven on Earth*, I wanted to explore the issues the film raises, so I turned to two women on opposite sides of the globe who are both working to eradicate gender-based violence: Purvi Shah and Soma Sen Gupta.

“In our community, family matters,” says Shah, who is the Executive Director of [Sakhi for South Asian Women](#), an organization in New York City that provides support for survivors of domestic violence in South Asian communities. “It’s not just the nuclear family that is very important... There is a whole network of community members and family members that are really vital to that relationship.”

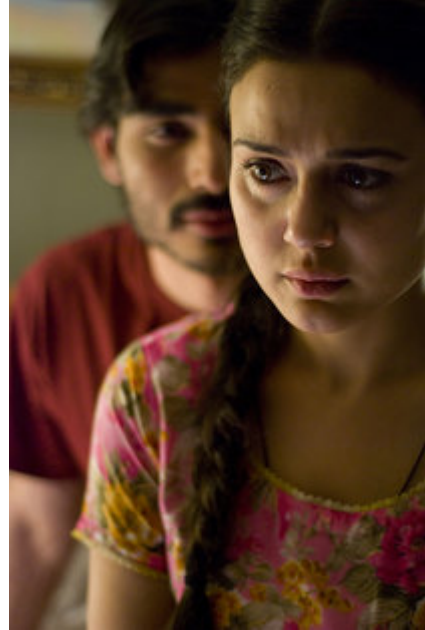
Across the world in Kolkata, I asked Sen Gupta if Purvi's experience in New York is also true for women in India. Sen Gupta is the Director of [Sanhita](#), a gender resource center in West Bengal whose main work is mainstreaming gender concerns like reproductive health, sexual harassment in the workplace, and gender-based violence and inequality. “When a family approaches us, the first thing they talk about is not the trauma of the woman,” she explains. “They talk about their own trauma, their own disappointment, their own setback because this also affects their own social status and prestige. A lot of things are at stake for them as well.”

Mehta seems to understand this, as one of the villains in *Heaven on Earth* is Rocky's mother, who appears to be jealous of her son's wife and on several occasions goads him into beating her. While there are many jokes thrown around about the contentious relationship between an Indian mother-in-law and wife, this element of Mehta's film reflects the lack of support that an abused woman may receive from her family and

community. It also mirrors the lack of support Rocky receives in bearing the responsibility of being the eldest son, who must not only provide for his family in Canada, but also work to ensure his extended family can eventually join them. When the pressure becomes too much, he takes out his frustration on Chand.

- Far from home, Chand is trapped in an abusive marriage to Rocky. Film still courtesy of [Mongrel Media](#) •

Familial obligation and the passive abuse that Indian men endure from in-laws is demonstrated in Mehta's character, Baldev. Rocky's domination of the household is juxtaposed by the impotence of this brother-in-law, who suffers a different, though equally stressful burden of responsibility. The unemployed, job-seeking Baldev is subjected to constant shaming by Rocky's parents for having to live off of his wife's family, which is thought to be the epitome of failure as a husband and father. Because of this indignity, he and his wife feel they cannot intervene in the abuse, and must endure the toll they see it taking on their own adolescent son and daughter.



Whether in India or North America, there is little information available regarding the prevalence of intimate partner violence in South Asian communities. Despite the women's movement bringing family and domestic violence into the public eye, Sen Gupta tells me, "There is a lack of access to information for women, and there is a lot of silence. There is absolutely no platform to talk about these issues or to share their concerns. Many of the women who tell us about their abuse are sharing it with us for the first time."

Certain topics remain under the radar in South Asian communities. When Sen Gupta has raised the issue of domestic violence with young women on college campuses, they are not interested in discussing the topic and feel it is passé. "There are a lot of serials (soap operas) they watch regularly that talk about domestic and family violence, so hearing about this is nothing new to them," she explains. "But things are not changing. If people are exposed to the problems through media, and they say they understand, then why is the situation not changing?" Having worked with young women myself, I can empathize with Sen Gupta's frustration.

One answer may be that there are very few organizations doing this type of work in India, and in other parts of the world—like New York—there are a lack of culturally-appropriate support services. Many times when victims seek help from an organization that doesn't understand their needs, they are re-traumatized by the very institutions that try to help them. These issues are compounded when living outside of one's country of origin, which is what prompted Sakhi's founding twenty years ago.



• Directory Deepa Mehta (left) with actress Preity Zinta/Chand. Photo courtesy of [Mongrel Media](#) •

An inability to access services is but one impediment South Asian domestic violence survivors who live outside their homeland face in escaping their situation. Other obstacles include language barriers, not knowing one's legal rights or recourse regarding abuse, dependence on one's spouse for

immigration, fear of an arduous and expensive international custody battle, a lack of self-sufficiency, and an absence of family, community, or religious support. Reflecting on *Heaven on Earth* with these issues in mind, I realized that Chand had several strengths that could facilitate her ability to leave, but sometimes, even those strengths aren't enough; one needs community support.

Sakhi's culturally-focused approach seeks to empower women to live self-determined lives. It is a model that is working in New York City. "Because Sakhi has provided support and tailored services available nowhere else, our call volume of new requests for assistance has more than tripled since 2001," says Shah. "In fact, more men are reaching out to find support for sisters, nieces, and aunts in abusive relationships...13% of our new calls in 2008 were from men, a rise from the 8% in 2006."

South Asian victims of domestic violence have a plethora of needs—multilingual intake and mental health services; translation assistance for court visits, public benefits offices, and health care visits; referrals for support services; education; and financial independence—and most of these needs transcend borders: in India alone there are several hundred spoken languages, and each region of the country has its own unique cultural, social, and religious practices. There is no singular portrait of a victim or survivor of abuse, as domestic violence spans demographics like age, country of origin or residence, marital choice, class and caste, education level, and religion. We do know that ending community bias against those who are abused is one step that we can all take to be accountable to each other.

"We are all connected," says Shah. "As resources around us shrink and community demand increases, we need our community support now more than ever."

### ***About the Author***

**Mandy Van Deven** is a freelance writer and the founder of the [Feminist Review](#) blog. Focusing on gender, politics, and popular culture, her work has appeared in various online and print media, including *AlterNet*, *Bitch*, *In These Times*, and *make/shift*. Mandy worked for over ten years as a grassroots organizer in New York and Atlanta. She is an

avid and enthusiastic world traveler who has collected friends in countries all over the globe. Mandy currently lives in Kolkata, India.